



Tourism leaders of the future present their survey findings at the Divi Phoenix Resort

Friday morning several key individuals working in Aruba's tourism industry attended a seminar titled "Imagine Aruba," which presented the findings of the students of the Aruba University's Hospitality and Tourism and Managements program. The thirteen students were divided into six teams and each conducted a survey amongst 200 island visitors split up between team members who explored the aspects of "Destination Brand Image and Visitor Experience." The findings proved to be very interesting to veterans of the island's tourism industry.

The Dean of the University Department of Hospitality & Tourism Management Studies (HTMS) Dr. Ryan Peterson along with Rosemarie Krebs J.D, Program Coordinator, graded the students in several categories regarding how they collated and presented their findings. The Dean confided that he did not find any "revelations," for those that are well versed with the industry, but confirmed many hunches amongst Aruba's tourism pundits.

Some interesting findings of the students' groups were that even though the question was approached in varying ways, most island visitors came to Aruba for relaxation. The number one feature of the island tourists identified with most are its beaches and then the reliable climate, followed by the safety of the island and the warmth and sincerity of the people. A very large percentage of first time visitors stated they would definitely return, and in fact, Aruba's tourist population consists of 40% return visitors, the highest rate in the Caribbean.

On the negative side of their findings, and with which experienced tourism personnel agree, visitors found nothing in Aruba's promotion as differentiating it from other Caribbean islands. This is usually dispelled upon visiting the island, but it is directly opposed to the principles of "branding," which is a very hot topic in the marketing industry. Some students, such as Juan Vega of Colombia and his group even devised a new advertising campaign complete with graphics that emphasizes Aruba relaxing qualities, including the creative slogan "Discover yourself...relaxing...in Aruba!"

The Brand Image Experience Survey was a summer project for the students, something that is required of them each year as they work their way to earning their bachelors degree's in Hospitality Management. Additional interesting findings were that the majority of Aruba's visitors are between the ages of thirty-four and seventy, and one issue that cropped up continually was that vacationers would like to experience more of the island's native culture. On the other side of that coin was the fact that most felt "very comfortable" with the influence of American society on the island, and the familiarity.

Dean Ryan stated the students were instructed to choose subjects who were very representative of Aruba's tourist population, and would provide equal input from both male and female visitors. "The number of people each student surveyed is not sufficient for drawing conclusions, but when all the results of all fifteen hundred surveyed are collated and compared it offers an accurate portrait of the tourist population."

The survey was conducted in collaboration with the Aruba Hotel and Tourism Association, (AHATA), and the students were very enthusiastic about the experience, including presenting their findings to tourism professionals for questions and comments. For many it was the first time, and their performance in conducting the survey displayed impressive diligence as did the professionalism of their presentation. It appears that the tourism industry will see some dynamic and determined individuals entering the field within the next few years.